

Synopsis of Vending Survey Results

Background:

On November 13, 2006, the Enhanced Business Information Center posted a survey on food vending and sent word out to the Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners (ANCs) and the Main Streets and passed out over 300 flyers at downtown metro stations. The goal was to help current and prospective future vendors by finding out what the people who live, work, and shop in Washington, DC, want from vendors.

In only two weeks, almost 500 people responded to this survey on vending. The survey is half about food and half about merchandise. Respondents are extremely enthusiastic (especially about food vending). 73% of the respondents live in DC and 78% work in DC. Results came from all income levels with the percentage very evenly split.

Thanks to all who responded to the survey and thanks to all of the current and prospective vendors who are interested in helping to make DC's vending the best in the world! For up-to-date information on vending in DC, visit Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) vending page at <http://dcra.dc.gov/dcra/cwp/view,a,1342,q,638095.asp>.

What We Heard

Food vending

The concern that we received most often was about variety. Several agencies are working hard to make it so that vendors can provide as much variety as possible in the products that they sell. We hope that vendors will respond to this request as well, by taking advantage of the new rules and regulations and trying to sell products that may be more appealing to the people who live, work and shop in DC.

Concern #1: Variety

The absence of variety came up again and again from respondents. When asked to rate the variety of food offered in DC by street vendors, 66.4% rated variety as poor!

Not only do respondents think that variety is important, they say that they will put their money where their mouth is. To the question, "Would you spend more money at food vending stands if they: Sold something different," 82.4% responded yes.

Respondents became more specific about what they wanted in question number 9: If there were an increase in variety among vended foods, would you want to see it in:

- More ethnic cuisine: 84.1%
- Different types of food (dessert, appetizer, breakfast, drink carts): 60%. The survey writers realized midway through the survey that they had included a phrase (prepackaged food) that was keeping survey takers from choosing this response (survey takers did NOT want more prepackaged food). Once the phrase was deleted, the percentage of responses to this choice immediately began to rise.
- More seasonal food: 59.6%
- More healthy cuisine: 56.1%

Respondents went on to emphasize their enthusiasm for variety in Question number 27 (the third to last question): “What was it that you liked most about your favorite vending city?” The survey writers were somewhat surprised that over HALF of the respondents still had the time and interest to write more information after having answered 26 questions. But they did, and in their responses, the word variety was used over 165 times.

Concern #2: Quality

Quality was the second major issue. 26.6% of respondents answered that quality was poor, 60.9% answered that quality was average, and only 11.3% said that quality was good.¹ And 74.1% of all people interviewed said that if carts had higher quality foods, they would buy more.

Respondents specifically mentioned that they a problem with today’s hot dogs is the steam tray. Quotations included:

- Steamed hot dogs or any [steamed] food for that matter are not appealing.
- Get away from the steam trays! fire up the grill!
- They should be able to use gas or propane grills and not just steamers.
- Also, please allow the vending stand operators to use gas or kerosene grills. It makes the food taste better than using flavor-robbing steam trays. Thank you!

People went out of their way to talk about how much they like the burrito vendor at 15th and K:

- I live in Logan Circle but work in Arlington. My favorite street vendor is the burrito guy on 15th and K. Unfortunately he is not open when I get back into DC, after 5 pm or on the weekends.
- Well, I only patronize Pedro and Vinny's Burrito Cart on 15th and K. And because I work on the Hill, that's a bit of a challenge. I would appreciate more carts across town, and vegetarian options. The carts on the Hill only serve Hot Dogs and packaged junk food similar to that available elsewhere, even in stores across the street.
- I used to work in Farragut North and loved the two burrito vendors in the area. Now I work in Foggy Bottom, and I wish we had something like them.
- We need guys selling chestnuts at Christmas time and more mom-and-pop homemade food. Finally, we need more ethnic food choices that reflect the international character of our city. And we need more carts downtown where our lunch options are limited to a handful of corporate chains. There is a fantastic Burrito cart on K street and 15th. We need many more just like it!

Here are some of the foods that respondents mentioned as alternatives to hot dogs:

- Fruit, salads, Mexican food, gyros, falafels, peanuts, warm roasted chestnuts, half smokes, hot dogs, spicy food, soup carts, certain percent of products must be made by vendor, quality ice cream, crepes, couscous, panini, warm pretzels, smoothies, Thai, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Middle Eastern, Coffee, Bagels, Burritos, bacon, Mediterranean, breakfast, falafel stands, Lebanese grills, pierogies, delicious pizza, knishes, vegetarian, French fries, kebabs, Indian, Thai, Sausages, Korean, regional American foods, food that is cooked right in front of you, toasted coconut cashews, French, Roti, Bahn mi (Vietnamese sandwich on baguette), tacos,

¹ Six respondents (1.3%) said that quality was excellent

Other feedback received:

- There were three other survey questions that did not receive overwhelmingly positive or negative responses. Take a close look, though. There is obviously room for improvement!
 - How do you rate the overall APPEARANCE of the carts of DC's food street vendors?
 - Poor: 27.7%
 - Average: 52.4%
 - Good: 18.6%
 - Excellent: 1.2%
 - How would you describe the overall CLEANLINESS of street food vendor carts in DC?
 - Poor: 17.8%
 - Average: 58.6%
 - Good: 22.5%
 - Excellent: 1%
 - How do you rate the CUSTOMER SERVICE of DC's food street vendors?
 - Poor: 6.7%
 - Average: 44.7%
 - Good: 41.6%
 - Excellent: 6.9%

Merchandise Vending

59.9% of the respondents said that they never bought from DC's street merchandise vendors.

Both quality and variety are concerns at about an equal level. Below are results from two questions for a comparison look:

How do you rate the VARIETY/QUALITY of merchandise that is available from DC's merchandise street vendors?

- Poor: Variety (35.8%) Quality (38.2%)
- Average: Variety (50.7%) Quality (54.2%)
- Good: Variety (12.6%) Quality (6.9%)
- Excellent: Variety (.9%) Quality (.7%)

Most important here is that 79.7% said that they would buy more if the vendors sold something different:

- 58.3% said they would buy more gift items (cards, flowers, local art)
- 64.7% said that they would buy more media (news, magazines, CDs and DVDs)
- 19.4% said that they would buy more luxury products (cashmere scarves, hats, beauty products etc). Some wrote in that they were concerned about theft for the vendors selling this merchandise.
- Inexpensive merchandise (13.3%) and DC/Capitol City merchandise (6.7%) are such low scores that they suggest that the others who DID NOT answer the question do not want to see any more of these products. See comments below for more about DC/Capitol City merchandise

There were a lot of follow up comments here about newspapers and magazines:

- People in DC read newspapers and magazines in vast quantities -- it's odd that there are not newsstands selling them.

- Newspaper/Magazine vendors are the biggest missing item that I think could do well in certain parts of town, especially outside metro stations. I will never have change to use a newspaper vending machine, but I can always stop at a vendor and pick one up. Also, the variety would be larger and I could read something different for a change.
- NY-style news stands would be a plus
- News-stands would be neat
- More magazine and newspaper carts (like in NY) would be awesome!
- Newsstand carts would be valuable in heavily foot-trafficked areas like Adams Morgan, downtown, and Dupont Circle.
- Where can I buy a newspaper if I don't have exact change?

It appears that people who live, work and shop in DC are not interested in any more DC/Capitol city merchandise: FBI sweatshirts, CIA baseball caps, etc. We heard a number of comments like:

- The last thing we need is more FBI sweatshirts.
- Too much touristy stuff--why not have news-stands like in NY or Philly?
- too much DC/Capitol merchandise. already

What ARE people looking for? Here is a list of what respondents said they would like to see provided by merchandise street vendors:

- Newspapers, magazines, handy-wipes, tissues, maps, diapers, formula, local art, band-aids, batteries, crafts, gifts, toiletries, books, flowers, umbrellas, hats, fans, earmuffs, comics, fruit, things stores won't carry because of small production volume, cds, videogames, kites, products produced by local businesses, artists who do portraits of people, handbags, scarves, Metrobus flashpasses.